

Critical Thinking: Competency Standards

Essential to the Cultivation of Intellectual Skills, Part 4

By Linda Elder and Richard Paul

In the last three columns we introduced the concept and provided several examples of critical thinking competency standards that target the cultivation of intellectual traits. In this column we continue the discussion of these competency standards that are essential to teaching and learning because they go beyond the development of skills and abilities to the fostering of essential intellectual virtues or dispositions.

It is not enough for students to learn critical thinking abilities. They need to cultivate within their own minds intellectual traits. These traits transform one's character. Through the development of intellectual traits, or virtues, students orient themselves in the world as fairminded thinkers who routinely think within alternative viewpoints, persevere through difficulties in issues, are open to new ways of looking at things, follow the best reasoning wherever it takes them, and change their minds when it makes sense. Students who discipline their minds (through developing intellectual virtues) routinely identify problems in their own reasoning to improve their thinking and live at a higher level of self-realization. When intellectual virtues are actively and explicitly taught across the academic institution, students develop as fairminded critical thinkers, ultimately leading to fairminded critical societies.

The following virtues—fairmindedness, intellectual humility, intellectual courage, intellectual empathy—are essential intellectual traits in an interconnected web that ultimately must be understood in relationship with one another (Paul & Elder, 2001). They are applicable to all education levels and potentially all domains of thought.

Standard Eight: Fairmindedness

Students who think critically strive to be fairminded.

Critical Thinking Principle

Fairmindedness requires treating all viewpoints alike, without reference to personal feelings or selfish interest, or the feelings or vested interests of our friends, community, nation, or species.

Performance Indicators and Dispositions

Students who think critically seek to treat all viewpoints with equality. Critical thinkers adhere to intellectual standards (such as accuracy and sound logic) uninfluenced by their own advantage or the advantage of their group.

Outcomes

1. Students demonstrate initial understanding of fairmindedness by stating, elaborating, and exemplifying the concept of fairmindedness.
2. Students avoid using their skills to gain advantage over others, score points on them, or make them look bad.
3. Students do not favor the viewpoints of those who support them but equally consider the viewpoints of those who agree and those who oppose them (using intellectual standards in determining what to accept or reject).
4. Students question their own purposes, evidence, conclusions, assumptions, concepts, and point of view with the same vigor that they question those of others.

5. Students strive to treat every viewpoint relevant to a situation in an unbiased, unprejudiced way.
6. Students actively work to diminish the powerful egocentric forces in the mind that favor one's own viewpoint while distorting and misrepresenting viewpoints with which it disagrees.
7. Students actively work to diminish the powerful sociocentric forces in the mind that favor the viewpoints of one's group while distorting and misrepresenting "out-group" viewpoints with which it disagrees.
8. Students demonstrate that they understand the importance of fairmindedness in thinking within and among the disciplines and professions.

Standard Nine: Intellectual Humility

Students who think critically routinely strive to apply intellectual humility.

Critical Thinking Principle

To develop intellectual humility, one must learn to actively distinguish what one knows from what one does not know.

Performance Indicators and Dispositions

Intellectual humility entails living in such a way as to routinely seek knowledge of one's ignorance. It involves a consciousness of the limits of one's knowledge, including sensitivity to circumstances in which one is likely to be self-deceived (due to one's native egocentricity). Intellectual humility entails being aware of one's biases and prejudices as well as the limitations of one's viewpoint and the extent of one's ignorance. Intellectual humility means recognizing that one should not claim more than one actually knows. It does not imply spinelessness or submissiveness. It implies the lack of intellectual pretentiousness, boastfulness, or conceit combined with insight into the logical foundations, or lack of such foundations, of one's beliefs.

Outcomes

1. Students demonstrate initial understanding of intellectual humility by stating, elaborating, and exemplifying the concept in numerous ways.
2. Students discover their own false beliefs, misconceptions, prejudices, illusions, and myths. They use this knowledge to gain better command of their minds.
3. Students suspend judgment about matters of which they are ignorant.
4. Students accurately distinguish what they understand about a subject from what they do not.
5. Students accurately articulate the extent of their ignorance.
6. Students avoid claiming to know what they have no defensible reason for claiming.
7. Students admit mistakes and change their views (when faced with reasoning superior to their own).
8. Students demonstrate awareness of and concern for the fact that they have been socially conditioned into the belief systems and worldview of their culture and nation (and naturally see their culture and nation as "correct" in its views). Students actively seek and carefully study the viewpoints of other cultures to gain new knowledge and insights.

- Students demonstrate understanding of the importance of intellectual humility in thinking at a high level within any discipline and profession.

Standard Ten: Intellectual Courage

Students who think critically exhibit intellectual courage.

Critical Thinking Principle

The mind does not naturally develop intellectual courage: Critical thinkers must consciously maintain the willingness to examine beliefs they hold dear and challenge popular beliefs through disciplined reasoning.

Performance Indicators and Dispositions

Intellectual courage entails consciousness of the need to face and fairly address ideas, beliefs, or viewpoints toward which one has strong emotions and to which one has not given serious hearing. Intellectual courage also entails the willingness to face the disapproval of the group in expressing an unpopular idea or challenging a popular one. Humans are in many ways natural conformists. They live in social groups and unreflectively accept the dominant beliefs of the groups that exercise control over them. Intellectual courage means recognizing that ideas considered dangerous or absurd within a society are sometimes rationally justified (in whole or in part). It means understanding that conclusions and beliefs inculcated in people are sometimes false or misleading. Since it is natural to seek group approval, intellectual courage is required when approval may be withdrawn for nonconformity.

Outcomes

- Students demonstrate initial understanding of intellectual courage by stating, elaborating, and exemplifying what it means.
- Students examine critically any and all of their beliefs, especially those they hold dear.
- Students fairly evaluate popular and unpopular ideas and beliefs; they determine the reasonability of these beliefs without reference to their popularity.

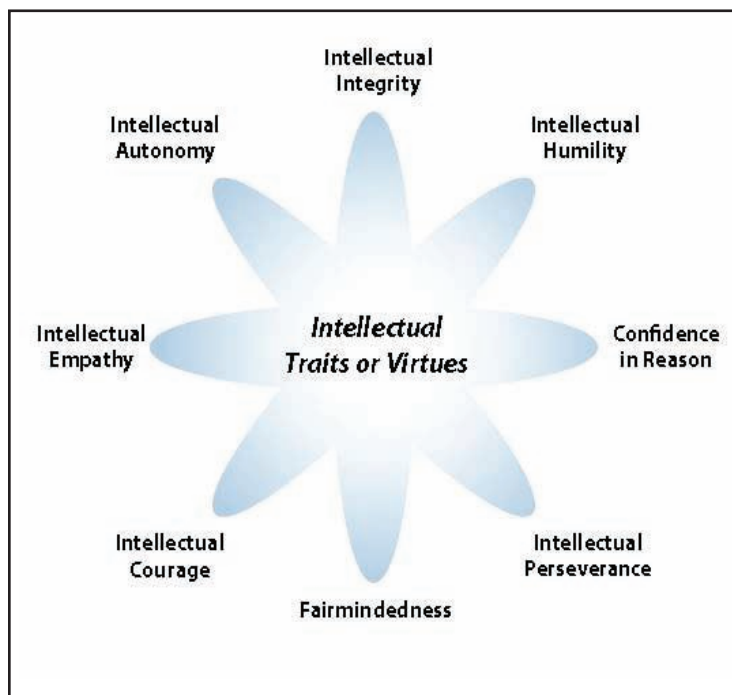


Figure 1. Competency standards essential to the cultivation of intellectual skills.

- Students demonstrate understanding of the fact that social groups routinely penalize people for nonconformity.
- Students express reasonable dissenting views, thereby showing they do not fear rejection by others.
- Students question popular beliefs (when those beliefs do not seem rationally justified).
- Students defend unpopular beliefs (when those beliefs seem rationally justified).
- Students demonstrate understanding of the importance of intellectual courage in thinking within specific disciplines and professions.

Standard Eleven: Intellectual Empathy

Students who think critically develop the capacity to sympathetically enter into points of view that differ from their own; they articulate those views in an intelligent, insightful, and fairminded way.

Critical Thinking Principle

The mind does not naturally develop intellectual empathy. Rather it is pre-disposed toward its opposite thinking within its own narrow viewpoint. Intellectual empathy requires practice in thinking within the viewpoints of others, especially those with whom one disagrees.

Performance Indicators and Dispositions

Students who think critically regularly demonstrate intellectual empathy. They routinely reconstruct (accurately) the viewpoints and reasoning of others. They routinely reason from premises, assumptions, and ideas other than their own. They are predisposed to remember occasions when they were wrong in the past despite an intense conviction of being right. These students continue to grow and develop, modifying their thinking by seriously considering widely different viewpoints over time.

Outcomes

- Students demonstrate initial understanding of intellectual empathy by stating, elaborating, and exemplifying what it means in numerous ways.
- Students frequently say, "I may be wrong here. I have often been wrong in the past," or words to this effect.
- Students imaginatively put themselves in the place of others (striving to accurately articulate others' viewpoints).
- Students regularly role-play the defense of beliefs other than their own (in an intelligent and insightful way).
- Students demonstrate that they understand the importance of intellectual empathy in thinking within the disciplines and professions.

Conclusion

Critical thinking competencies should be fostered across the curriculum, within every subject and discipline. This column has focused on competencies for four essential intellectual virtues among the most important of all competencies. They are indispensable to the cultivation of the fairminded critical thinker and, by implication, the cultivation of fairminded critical societies.

Reference

Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2001). *Critical thinking: Tools for taking charge of your learning and your life*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Linda Elder is an Educational Psychologist and President of the Foundation for Critical Thinking. Richard Paul is Director of the Center for Critical Thinking and Director of Research of the Foundation for Critical Thinking, Tomales, CA: www.criticalthinking.org